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## Life and Death

Joan Houser

*Western Washington University*

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Western Washington University

## Life and Death

Joan Houser

Honors Senior Capstone Project

Professor Kate Trueblood

## Critical Preface

My combination of an English major with an Environmental Studies minor often gets me raised eyebrows. It is an unusual combination and I wanted this collection of short stories to reflect what I have learned from each discipline. Going in to the project I especially wanted to avoid sounding preachy or writing didactic characters, and as a result of this none of my stories are about saving the environment. Rather, I wanted to explore how human relationships with each other and human relationships with nature interact, differ, and affect one another. All of my stories feature a character that interacts with the environment around them and focus on how that relationship affects them

In preparation for this project I read two novels that greatly influenced me: *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver and *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki. In the former, the main character was not one you would expect to see at the forefront of a novel (a young mother in an unfulfilling marriage) and I tried to emulate this in my stories. I wanted my characters to be believable people that you might meet in real life rather than unattainable, idealized humans. In the latter, the environment took a background to human relationships, although it was still a prominent theme throughout. I did this as well with a couple of my stories, allowing the natural world to take a back seat and have a subtler effect on the characters.

This project taught me a lot about the revision process. I had not done a huge amount of revision before, but I heavily revised most of these stories, especially “Mazes” and “Metamorphosis.” I learned to look at my own work with a more critical eye and to not be afraid to cut portions that aren’t necessary even if I enjoy them.

Overall I feel that this is an accurate representation of the things I have learned as an Honors student and English major.

## Withered

*Plink... plink... plink...*

Each water droplet seemed to grow louder while he sat in his armchair, head tilted back against the worn cushion. He sighed, a slight edge of contentment nudging over him, so rare these days under the stress of all the work he had to do.

In his mind's eye, he could clearly see each pearly drop roll off the glistening leaf of his pioneer violet and drop into the small pool that took up a portion of his terrarium, sending ripples cascading outward, tiny tidal waves in his miniature ecosystem. How badly he wanted to disappear among his plants.

They were easy to care for. Or, at least, easier to care for than his mother, whose voice now croaked from the door of her bedroom.

“Richard, honey, could you get me a glass of water?” Her feeble voice wavered, crawling its way through the hallway on hands and knees before it finally gasped its way into the living room where he sat.

“Of course, Mom,” he called back, and heaved his bulk out of the chair to water his mother. It seemed he could never escape his aching feet. From waiting tables at work, to waiting on his mother at home, he always had to be at the ready to get whatever it was his patron desired.

He padded into the kitchen and looked wearily at the pile of dirty dishes that waited for him.

The cupboard creaked faintly as he opened it, only to find a shelf devoid of glasses. He grunted in defeat, and cleaned a dirty cup from the pile in the sink.

He shuffled away from the kitchen and down the shadowy hallway bedecked with pictures of the two of them in their younger days. They were unevenly spaced on the wall, with

blank spaces where photos that included his father had hung before the divorce. The photographs of his younger brother Danny were still there, and it was strange to see his face behind glass when he hadn't seen it in person in more than a year.

He sidled into the room. There she lay, entombed by the stained sheets and musty smelling comforter, pillows piled high to prop her against the dark headboard.

"Here you go, Mom." Richard handed her the glass and watched as she drank it, his hands folded, ready for her next demand. She drank deep and long, allowing the water to seep into her withered roots. He could practically see the water wash down her throat beneath her papery skin.

"Thank you, darling," she said, handing the cup back to him. "Would you mind opening the window for me?"

The breeze that entered the room made him wonder if she would float away on the wind. She didn't, despite looking like nothing more than a fragile leaf detached from its tree in autumn. Instead, she closed her watery grey eyes and appeared to fall asleep.

He left her room and deposited the glass back in the kitchen sink with its grimy companions before going to his own room.

Pushing open the door, his eyes immediately went to his precious little garden encased in a terrarium by his windowsill. He moved toward it and peered in at the vibrant green foliage.

Each plant was native to the Pacific Northwest, he had created his own perfect little biome without any invasive plants or pests. His eyes wandered over the leaves, and a smile touched his tired brown eyes. It smelled like water and soil and nature, with just a hint of ginger from his *Asarum caudatum*. He rubbed the Wild Ginger's shiny, heart-shaped leaves, allowing the spicy aroma to spread throughout the terrarium. It wafted its way through the plants, winding

around the four-petalled white flowers of his Western Bunchberry, sneaking between the jagged leaves of his Three-leaf Foamflower, twirling about the slender stems of his Pacific Waterleaf. He moved his hand to the mottled leaves of his Western Rattlesnake Plantain and stroked them lovingly. Beneath one was hiding some of the beautiful yellow blooms of his Pioneer Violet. The rest of the tiny sun-like flowers crept towards the tiny pond he had outlined with pebbles and shells found by the beach, their roots thirsty even in the moist dirt.

He shut his eyes and chanted their Latin names under his breath like a monk reciting his daily prayers. “*Cornus unalaschkensis, Tiarella trifoliata, Hydrophyllum tenuipes, Goodyera oblongifolia, Viola glabella, Asarum caudatum.*”

In his mind’s eye he shrunk himself down to only an inch tall and hide under the leaves of his carefully cultivated plants, close to the cool damp earth and sheltered by the crisp green leaves that towered above him, away from everything that kept him up at night: his mother, his back pain, his cholesterol, the scanty tips he’d been making so far this month. Bending even closer to his plants, he wished he were flexible enough to bury his face in them. He breathed in deep once more, then straightened, not wanting to damage the terrarium with his more than ample stomach.

He turned and went to his bed which groaned in protest when he sat on it, though the thin mattress’s springs were as unforgiving as his headache.

He lay back with a grunt, not bothering to change into his pajamas, and closed his eyes.

A familiar imaginary floral shop materialized behind his eyelids, and he began to wander around it in his mind, imagining the bursts of colorful petals that would explode from every nook and cranny in his store. Customers would come in droves just to gape at his mind-bogglingly beautiful arrangements. High profile celebrities would enlist him for their weddings and parties,

where his bouquets would be the center of attention and the height of conversation. His innovative use of local and seasonal plants would catapult him to success. He sighed in contentment, as he then bought a large plot of land and began to cultivate his own garden in which every native plant was pruned to perfection. He wandered amongst the flowers and foliage, lost in his own magical forest. No one could reach him here. He was completely, entirely, utterly alone, with only his wonderful plants for company. He easily got down on his knees to weed his babies, ensuring that each had room to grow and flourish. He watered his garden, and marveled at the pearly drops that clung to the delicate petals. Each drop magnified the veins of the leaf or petal that was underneath it, providing him an up-close look at his little darlings. It was perfect. There were no rose midges or snails or other pests that could destroy his hard-cultivated work. This was his very own Garden of Eden, and there was no forbidden fruit to ruin it.

“Richard? Richard, honey, where are you?”

He groaned, pulled out of his reverie. He heaved himself to his feet once more, and dragged himself to her room.

“What have you been up to, honey?” she asked when his face appeared in the doorway. “You never tell me how you are, you’re so focused on caring for little old me.” She put a withered hand to his cheek. “You need to shave! You can’t go to work with stubble like this.”

“Which do you want, Mom, for me to tell you what I’ve been doing, or for me to shave? I can’t do both at once.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” she huffed. “Fine, tell me what you do in that room of yours.”

“I take care of my terrarium.”

“Oh, I remember that old thing! I haven’t seen it in a while... Would you take me to look at it? I’m tired of only being able to see the green of the tree outside my window.”

Richard looked at her, his brows brought together in puzzlement. His mother was the type to scoff at a potted plant but swoon over a bouquet. She liked plants in theory, just so long as no actual dirt was involved.

“I guess... if you want to. How is your back feeling today?”

His mother waved a hand dismissively. “Oh I’ll be fine. You really don’t need to worry over me so much darling.”

*Yes. Yes I do...* he thought, but rather than saying that he held out a hand and helped her out of bed.

Her gnarled feet searched for her fuzzy pink slippers, sliding across the dark hardwood floor unsuccessfully.

With a grunt and a few cracks and pops Richard managed to get down on his knees and grab the nubby footwear from underneath her bed.

“Thank you honey,” she croaked as her withered feet found their old comfortable friends.

He grasped the faded quilt that spanned her mattress and heaved himself to his feet.

“Alright, Mom. Are you ready to make the trek?” He shot her a weak smile.

“Oh, don’t make such a big deal out of it. We’re just going down the hall, not up Mt. Rainier!”

*Might as well be Mt. Everest for how mobile you are,* he thought. He knew this was an exaggeration, but he couldn’t help but think it. “Ok, here we go then.” He reached for her walker but she waved it away dismissively.



“I don’t need that old thing. I can do it just fine without it! Really Richard, I’m not helpless.”

Against his better judgement he conceded, and returned the tennis ball feet of the appliance to their permanent resting spot.

With one hand hovering behind her back, he helped her make her way towards his room. The lumpy rug of the hallway seemed like rough terrain, and he proactively grasped his mother’s elbow.

“Get off! I can do it myself.” She wrenched her arm out of his hand, although not very forcefully due to her lack of muscle mass.

“Sorry!” He put his hands up defensively. “Not touching you, see?”

His mother put her arms out like a tightrope walker and moved a little quicker. He allowed her to draw a pace or two ahead of him. He could feel the eyes of his ancestors judging him from the black and white photos on the wall. *She’s going to fall*, they seemed to say. He shook his head, trying not to listen. *You won’t be able to catch her. You’re too fat. You’re getting old. You can’t provide for her properly.*

He did his best to block out the noise in his head and watched his mother shuffle along as fast as she could go.

Her moth eaten pink bathrobe was in need of a wash, but she so rarely took it off he wasn’t sure when he’d be able to throw it in the laundry. He could see the stains on the back from those occasions when her lumbering gait couldn’t get her to the bathroom on time. That was happening more often of late. If only she would agree to use her walker.

Just as he thought this, as if in response to the synapses in his brain, his mother’s left foot hit a lump in the carpet. She pitched forward with a soft “Oh!”, but miraculously managed to

steady herself on the wall, knocking an old black and white picture of herself in her prom dress askew.

“Are you all right Mom?” he asked, knowing what her answer would be.

“Fine, fine!” She waved a frail hand in his direction, nearly as thin and frail as the taffeta of that old dress.

He reached out a pudgy hand to right the picture, marveling at how the sparkling-eyed young lady had deteriorated into the crone-like figure that was now hunched in front of him. Her younger self simpered back at him from the wall, clearly aching to dance but forced to remain in her wooden frame.

He looked back towards his living, breathing mother just in time to see her stumble into his bedroom. He stayed where he was for a moment, imagining that when he walked in after her he would find a middle aged woman, still spry although a bit arthritic, folding his size medium clothes for him, just as she had done when he was a teenager.

“Oh, your plants are lovely!” she said, her feeble voice breaking in to his reverie.

He trailed his fingers across the dark stained wood of the picture frame, leaving slight oily prints, before he moved towards his room again.

“Thanks, Mom.”

The words had barely left his lips when he heard a resounding crash and a strangled cry.

He froze, the bulge of his stomach just shy of his doorway on the right. Knowing what his eyes would see when he rounded the corner, he was unable to make his feet move from the comfort of the worn rug in the hallway. They remained fixed on the Turkish flowers that he had spent so much time tracing with his fingertips when he was younger, marveling at the intricacies of the patterns.

He dragged one foot forward, then another, until he finally made it past the white paint of the door frame stained brown from years of hands placed on it.

The sight that greeted him was one from his nightmares. But his mind's eye had never truly captured what his mother would look like crumpled on the floor of his bedroom, looking like little more substance than the clothes she wore. He certainly hadn't imagined the moist soil dampening her robe, or the delicate green leaves smashed beneath her hands, or the deep gash in her leg from a shard of his terrarium.

He sank to his knees, barely comprehending what he saw before him.

"Mom," he said. The word was barely a croak in his dry throat.

"Richard," she said, and the pain she conveyed in his name spurred him back to his feet.

He fumbled in his pants pocket to find his phone, only to realize he had left it on the coffee table in the living room. He stumbled blindly across the hall, the image of his bleeding mother and his destroyed terrarium implanted on his brain.

He knocked over the small round table that sat next to his recliner, and he tripped over its legs.

Just barely managing to catch himself, he reached for his phone. The power button elicited no response.

*Oh God, where did I leave the charger?* he thought, looking about wildly.

He stopped for a moment and steadied himself against the arm of his recliner. A deep breath in and out did little to slow his racing heart beat or the trickle of cold sweat down the back of his neck.

A wave of disconnected thoughts raced through his brain.

That time the bully who was a grade above him kicked his shin on the playground, hard enough so that he wouldn't be able to join the other kids in kick ball and when he'd seen a butterfly alight on a Pioneer Violet, and the bright yellow blooms had sparked his passion for native plants and how Danny had kept encouraging his mom to walk without her walker, despite Richard's insistence that she really wasn't mobile enough.

And suddenly it came to him: his charger was plugged into the wall next to his bed, in the outlet beneath the table that his terrarium once sat upon.

He turned and walked back towards the scene in his bedroom, dreading laying eyes upon his mother again. He could hear her whimpers coming from behind the doorframe, and when he entered the room he saw that she was crying, the tears dripping from the papery skin on her chin.

He knelt beside her. "Ow!" His knee had just become a little too friendly with a shard of glass. He flicked it out of the way and reached over the piles of dirt and leaves to plug his phone into the charger.

It buzzed, and the screen lit up.

As he waited for it to boot up he put a hand on his mother's silky white hair. "It'll be okay Mom."

Then he reached toward a lone petal of a Pioneer Violet, torn off when it had all come crashing to the floor, and its sunny yellow seemed too happy for the wreckage that surrounded him.

## Mazes

She could see the Maze Man through the morning fog, a shadowy figure hardly distinguishable from the strange shapes made by the dense water droplets, save for his floppy sun hat that would become useful later in the day, and the ever-present stick he used to draw his elaborate mazes in the wet sand.

Where had he learned to make such elaborate labyrinths? She could just make out his figure turning towards her as she sprinted past, her Nikes kicking up showers of sand behind her. She couldn't see his face in the mist, and his form disappeared behind her.

Her face was misted with both sweat and water droplets, and she flicked some off her eyelashes, not that there were any obstacles she needed to be aware of out here. It was just her and the crunching sand and the sucking, slapping waves and the occasional seagull soaring in and out of the rolling fog.

In front of her a plastic bag tumbled almost eagerly toward the Pacific Ocean. What was that giant trash island thing she'd heard about? Maybe it would end up there.

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After her run, Victoria dropped her keys on the impeccably dusted set of drawers by the door, so unlike her apartment back in Seattle, and called "Rachel, I'm home!"

There was no reply, and after a moment of listening she heard the water of the shower running. She trotted up the wooden staircase to the bedroom hung with picturesque photographs of the ocean.

She exchanged her neon pink shirt for a plain gray crop top and toasted herself a bagel. The back porch offered an excellent breakfast view, and she leaned against the doorframe while she ate. She gazed down the nearly cliff-like hill. The mist was clearing. She could just make out

the crashing waves through the sparse, spindly trees that hung on to the sandy dirt. It must have been akin to a forest before this development cropped up.

Rachel stuck her towel-wrapped head out of the bathroom behind her. “Hey hon. Good run today?”

“Yeah. Wish I could run on a beach like this every day.”

“Not if it means living in a town as insipid as this one.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. Seabrook’s not that bad.” Although she could admit that after a day here the idyllic seashell upholstery was looking more kitschy and the “weathered” banisters on the staircase were looking more obviously stained.

“They have fake shutters on the windows. Fake. Shutters. They’re not even big enough to use even if they were real!” Rachel threw up her arms and disappeared back into the steam-filled bathroom. “And the names of those tiny ‘neighborhoods?’ Northwest Glen. Beach Camp. Farm District. Ugh. Our cottage is called Soft Zephyr for God’s sake. What possessed you to pick a vacation spot like this one? I thought you had better taste.”

Victoria leaned toward the bathroom, indignant. “Hey, you’re the one who wanted to get away from it all. ‘Escape to the ocean’ were the words you used, if I remember.”

“And you’re the one who suggested this fake fucking town.”

Victoria’s stomach knotted angrily. She always hated this point in relationships when the honeymoon period was starting to wear off. “Well you didn’t have to go along with it.”

Nothing but a simmering silence came from the bathroom.

Yeah, definitely starting to wear off.

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Victoria closed the lid of her Mac, eyes blurry from two hours of screen time. Why did *Fallout 4* have to be so addicting?

Rachel was nowhere to be found in the house, so she returned to the beach and wandered along the shore for a while, sticking close to the water where the sand was firmer.

Rachel's hands snaked around her waist and she flinched.

"Hey." She placed her pale hand over her girlfriend's caramel one.

"Hey."

Rachel slipped her fingers into Victoria's and they strolled parallel to the waves. They didn't say much, mostly looked out over the ocean as if they wished they could just walk into the water and disappear.

Looking up onto the sand Victoria noticed the Maze Man's finished maze. It was a long one today. Not square or rectangular, rather only a few feet wide and at least 50 feet long, receding into the distance.

"Come on, let's do the maze." She tugged at Rachel's hand.

Rachel shrugged, and they wandered through the twisting pathways together. They hit one dead end, and then another. Rachel huffed and stomped over the impeccably drawn lines in the direction of Soft Zephyr.

Victoria watched, then turned back to her slow plod through the labyrinth.

She bent down and took off her shoes. Her toes sunk into the sand, caressed by each tiny granule hot from the sun, and her footprints followed her through the maze.

It deposited her close to the water. The ocean seemed inviting, so she sat down and allowed the foamy waves to engulf her legs.

She buried her hands in the wet sand.

Relationships always end up this way. Stupid petty fights never get resolved. Doors get slammed and angry texts get sent and then regretted and she ends up eating a whole tub of cookie dough ice cream all by herself and then going on a three-mile run to try and work it off while listening to heavy metal in a vain attempt to drown out stupid self-deprecating thoughts like these.

She didn't notice she'd been crying until the tears stopped falling. She stood and wiped the remnants off her face.

A second maze by the Maze Man was just a ways down the beach and she began to plod her way through it, taking the corners slowly, marveling at how straight the lines were in the glittering brown sand. This one was far more square, but the pathways were thinner, and she continued to hit dead ends. The tide reached the edge closest to the ocean and washed away into the sea. Victoria stood in the center of the maze and waited. The sun slowly lowered itself in the sky and the water crept closer to her until it tickled her feet. She waded forward until she was knee deep.

She stood there, alone with the sea and the sky and the gulls' bellies wheeling above her head.

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"What the fuck is that?" Victoria stared at the ghastly canvas in front of her, propped nonchalantly on the idyllic seashell upholstery of the living room sofa.

"I painted it today. Saw the bird on the beach. But you wouldn't know since you spent all your time today doing those pointless mazes. Hope you're not too sunburned." Rachel dried her hands and left the soapy dishes in the sink.



After she disappeared down the hallway Victoria turned back to the painting. A bird with its stomach torn open. From inside its gut a collection of bottle caps, bits of plastic wrap, even a toothbrush cascaded out onto the sand.

Victoria gagged and turned away.

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That night she couldn't sleep. She felt hot and clammy, and she listened enviously to Rachel's steady deep breathing beside her. She untangled herself from the sweaty sheets and opened the window.

A cool ocean breeze washed over her. She could hear the cries of the far-off gulls.

She turned from the window and tiptoed into the living room where Rachel had propped up her painting to dry. The fluorescent light of the house gave the painting an even ghastlier hue than it had when in the afternoon sun.

Each stroke was hurried yet deliberate. She peered closely at the paint, each rippling fold of color dotted with sand like that famed Monet painting Rachel had gushed about. Each bottle cap gleamed the sickly artificial blues and reds and greens of mass production. The delicate feathers of the creature drooped around the explosion of deathly color that burst from its belly, vomiting itself across the canvas and into her mind. Its feet curled, its talons clutching for time it had already lost. There was no gleam in its eyes. It was the most disgusting painting Rachel had done yet.

Victoria reached up to swat some hairs away from her face, and realized that hot angry tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Fine. So, this bird had fallen from the sky, starving from its belly filled with indigestible objects and all Rachel wanted to do about it was paint a fucking picture.

Victoria could do better. She could do much better.

She slammed the sliding door behind her just as dawn was breaking and ran down to the beach. Every piece of trash she found along the way she grabbed: a plastic bag, several bottle caps of both the plastic and metal varieties, a couple of water bottles to go with those caps. She used her shirt as a basket, pulled it away from her skin so she could carry more detritus.

The tide was far out. All she could see was wet sand reflecting the mist, no actual waves although she could hear their muffled crash and roil across the beach.

She kicked off her flip flops and allowed her toes to feel the biting cold when they hit the wet sand. She dropped one bottle cap and began.

She made her way in circles, curling round and round, dropping each piece of litter in an interconnected spiral. She didn't know enough to make a true maze, but she could do a labyrinth like the ones some people used for meditation. Her labyrinth would be a testament to all the seabirds that had stomachs filled with petroleum products mistaken for food. A statement that people could see and interact with.

She returned to the edge of the beach several times to forage for more trash. An aluminum can, a discarded movie theater ticket, more plastic bottles and plastic bags.

She had to use rocks to keep some of the lighter things from blowing away in the morning breeze.

After her eighth trash collecting spree she returned to find the Maze Man standing at the entrance to her rubbish creation.

A can of coke fell from the heap in her arms and hit the sand with a muffled pang.

"I-it's a trash labyrinth," Victoria said, her arms tight around her collection. Stupid, of course he could see what it was.

He looked at her, his face all grizzled folds of tanned skin haloed by long grey hair flecked with sand, and nodded. Without a word, he continued down the beach.

Victoria watched him go. Just before the mist obscured him she saw him lower his stick and begin to draw in the sand.

Several trash trips later she stood in the middle of her finished creation. The breeze flicked sand into her face and rustled her shirt. The labyrinth spiraled out around her like a giant whirlpool of flotsam. She stepped carefully over the lines to the beginning and began to walk.

Stupid Rachel. Always getting worked up over stupid things. This vacation was supposed to be relaxing. Instead she pouts about the location and paints a picture of a dead bird. What kind of painting was that? Rachel's other paintings always looked sloppy to her, but at least they usually had pleasing subject matter: flowers, landscapes, etc.

Victoria looked down at a bottle cap and an image of it sitting heavily in an albatross's stomach lodged itself in her mind. How common was that, to have birds die of starvation from eating too much plastic? Why had she never heard about this before? Did it happen to other animals too? A Seattleite, she'd always done her best to recycle, but if sea creatures were dying like this then that wasn't nearly enough. Wasn't there some sort of giant trash island in the middle of the ocean? She vaguely remembered hearing something about that. All the cries to care for the environment were a steady background of Pacific Northwest life, but she'd never heeded the call to action.

Maybe she'd start volunteering. Once the pain of the breakup that was looming around the next bend was over she'd take some time to be single and make a positive impact on others.

She stopped in the center of the labyrinth and sat down. It felt good to have a plan, a path she could follow. The lump in her throat, like a swallowed bottle cap, disappeared down into her stomach.

\*\*\*

“What the fuck is this?”

Victoria had dragged Rachel out to the beach, and her girlfriend was staring indignantly at the trash labyrinth.

“So I can’t express myself through art too? Or is that just your thing?” Victoria crossed her arms.

“Since when have you been interested in art? You’re a computer programmer for God’s sake. It’s like pulling teeth just to get you to look at my paintings and now suddenly you want to ‘express yourself?’ Yeah, right. I know exactly what this is.”

“Well maybe if your paintings weren’t so ugly I’d take a second look at them.”

Rachel jerked back, stung, her mouth open slightly. Then, “We’re leaving tonight. This trip was obviously a bad idea.” She turned away to head back to the cabin.

Victoria swallowed, guilt clutching at her throat. “But I already paid for the rest of our nights here.”

“Fine, you can stay if you want, but I’ll be out of here tomorrow morning. Good luck finding a ride home.”

She sighed. It would be more enjoyable without her here anyway. She could wallow for a bit, eat a tub of ice cream, text her friends from back home, toast marshmallows on the beach... Victoria watched Rachel’s back grow smaller across the sand, and looked up. Above her the gulls wheeled in and out of the clouds, their bellies as white as the sea foam below them.

## Green Fire

Her pale ears twitched in response to a particularly strong gust of wind through the trees, the susurrus nearly drowning out the other sounds surrounding them. Her five packmates stood still, glossy black noses quivering, tasting the air for the direction the herd of deer had gone.

A cacophony of smells wafted through the forest, each more important than the last. The rich musk of recent deer droppings, the pungent urine of the alpha who had just marked a tree, and, very faintly, a human and his horse who had come through here in the last couple days.

She started forward, nose still lifted high, and broke into a silent run, loping along the faint game trail overshadowed by snowberry. The dirt and roots felt solid beneath her paws as she sped through the trees. Behind her came the faint sounds of panting hot breath and branches catching on thick gray fur. Her eyes remained ever forward, however, and ears pricked for any sight or sound of their prey.

Then a new scent wafted across her trail, and she slowed her calculated run, the pack slowing behind her as well. She stopped and lifted her nose to better capture the scent.

Men. Two of them. One larger and one smaller. They were not close. She deemed there was little risk of encountering them.

The heavy collar around her neck itched and she shook her head.

Her family milled about her, pelts brushing up against one another. One of her daughters moved up and mouthed her snout affectionately, and she began to move forward again. There was an older, frail deer in the herd. It would not take long to hunt her.

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Their hike smelled of rotting leaves and the sharp tang of gun oil. Pa's left hand hung loosely by his side, and Steven told himself that he didn't want to grab it. He knew how Pa

would react if he did something so cowardly. Instead, he tightened his hold on the strap of his bolt action shotgun and checked over his shoulder to make sure it was pointing straight up, away from anything he shouldn't accidentally shoot. He was the only one with a gun today, since he was privileged enough to be doing the shooting. He told himself not to mess this up.

Pa stopped. "Do you remember where we're headed?"

Steven looked around, frowning. His grip on the strap loosened and Pa grabbed the barrel of his gun as it tilted dangerously away from the sky.

"Watch it," Pa said, the corners of his mouth turned down.

"Sorry," Steven mumbled. "We're following the game trail to the clearing." He squinted down at the earth beneath his scuffed hiking boots. Cloven hoofprints were faint in the dirt, a confusing tangle of partial indentations half hidden underneath leaves that had been kicked over the trail. "This is a track," he said, pointing to a small gouge in the earth.

"Good job," Pa said, and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Can you find another one?"

He moved forward a few paces, carefully scanning the ground for another telltale sign. They made slow progress, Steven tentatively taking the lead, picking their way across the gnarled roots of the game trail. Pa would occasionally correct his ten-year-old when he made a mistake, but for the most part he allowed his son to guide them through the forest, always keeping an eye on the direction his rifle was pointed and giving it a nudge when it strayed too far from its vertical position.

Steven, for his part, kept his eyes on the ground, practicing his tracking skills as they headed toward their destination.

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Her muscles tensed as she snuck silently through the underbrush. The smell of the deer on her tongue was so close she could taste it.

Soft breaths from behind her fell upon her haunches, but in a moment her family dispersed as they broke up to cut off the frail deer from its herd.

With a few more steps she could see it, trailing along behind its family, just the barest hint of a limp in its hoofbeats.

The sound the herd made as it slowly trudged through the forest was akin to a thunderstorm in her sensitive ears.

She crept closer.

Now she could make out the flies on its back legs that buzzed into the air with each lumbering step.

She could smell her packmates not far off, encircling the tail end of the herd, as silent as wind through the trees.

Quickly, she would creep forward, slinking from bush to bush, then be still, moving nothing except her eyes and her quivering snout that was constantly searching for clues as to where her pack members were and whether the deer had been alerted to their presence.

A doe's head shot up, ears pricked, eyes wide.

One of her packmates had moved too quickly. Like a wave, the herd leapt into a run, necks and legs extending eagerly toward their next meal.

She pounced.

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The surrounding forest was almost blue in the pre-dawn light. In a few deft tugs, their popup ground blind was ready to go, and Pa moved it into the foliage.

“You doin’ ok, bud?” he asked, voice low.

Steven nodded and crawled into the darkness of the blind.

Pa checked the wind one last time, then took his place next to his son. “Do you remember what I told you we do now?”

“We wait.”

“And are you allowed to talk?”

“No.”

“Good. Don’t fidget too much either. Deer will be able to hear your clothes rustling.” He zipped open the window that faced the clearing and watched Steven correctly position his shotgun. He nodded in approval.

Silence wasn’t quite the right word for what came next. The ground blind muffled the sounds of the forest, but they still came through the thin fabric walls. Mysterious birds chirped and unknown critters scampered through the dead leaves on the forest floor.

Then a different sound cut through the cold air.

It rung throughout the forest – clear, confident, powerful. The howling of the apex predator.

Pa went rigid, broad shoulders tensing, knuckles whitening.

Steven’s mouth hung slack, more in awe than in fear. The few previous times he’d heard this song he’d been tucked safely underneath his covers, but it was different when he was in the wolves’ territory. The only thing that gave him an advantage here was the gun in his hands, a gun that he’d never used to shoot a living thing before.

The sound echoed throughout the forest and was repeated, like a wild choir singing the hymns of nature.



Steven exchanged a glance with Pa, his small brown eyes meeting his father's big blue ones, the howls continuously resounding in their ears even in those silent spaces between the notes.

"It's the Loup Loup pack," Pa said. "We should go. Give me your shotgun."

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Her muscles clenched, her sinews stretching as she extended her legs and dug her claws into the earth, pulling herself toward the ailing deer.

In her peripheral vision, she could see two of her pack members howling at the heels of the rest of the herd, driving them off in a different direction.

The old deer veered right, then quickly changed its mind when it saw the second wolf that was there to meet it. She drew level with the deer, and it made a valiant last effort to evade the predators, putting on a last burst of speed. Flecks of spittle flew from its graying muzzle and its eyes were wide as it tried to ignore the pain in its lame leg.

With a few more lunges the deer's leg twisted, and it fell to the ground, neck still straining toward the sky.

She sunk her teeth into its neck, the familiar coppery blood coating her tongue as she yanked, ripping the deer's esophagus away from its body. Eddies of red gathered at her paws, mingling with the dirt that flecked the fur on her legs. The scent of the humans was lost to her amongst the steaming carcass, and she breathed deep, reveling in the comforting smell of fresh prey, food for her pack, the promise of another week of survival.

Her pack members descended upon the meal, ripping and tearing and yipping and snuffling. She gulped back the hunk of neck she still held clenched in her deadly teeth, the taste of venison rewarding her for her efforts.

Out of the forest loped her two packmates who had chased off the rest of the herd and they tore into the deer carcass with gusto. She joined them in tearing into the hard-earned meat.

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“Pa!” Steven whispered, rescinding his earlier notion that he didn’t want to hold his father’s hand and reaching for it. “Pa look!” He pointed into the underbrush. He squeezed his father’s thick fingers in surprise when he didn’t pull away.

They had been cautiously following the trail back the way they had come when the sounds of yipping and growling met their ears.

Steven’s small finger pointed to a patch of gray fur to their right. The wolves were tearing into the carcass of a deer with gusto – six of them clambering over each other to try and get as much as possible.

One wolf with a large radio collar around her neck raised her head and looked at them, her blood-stained muzzle rippling as she bared her teeth in a snarl. The device around her neck did nothing to make her look more like a dog, despite having been put there by humans.

“Stay behind me and back away,” Pa said. “Try and make yourself look big, and don’t turn your back on the pack. Don’t look into their eyes.”

Steven nodded, and kept his eyes locked on the silvery coat of the she-wolf. She did not move from her spot, but her bright eyes followed them as they backed away.

In that moment, Steven knew that all the things he’d ever heard about the strength of wolves were true: how easily they could kill a calf. He knew how a deer felt when it was being sized up for a meal.

But he also knew that she was only doing what she had to in order to survive. She was a mother protecting her brood.

Then she disappeared from view in the trees that rose like green fire around them.

Pa lowered his gun, which Steven hadn't even realized he had been aiming with. His shoulders softened first, and he raised his head, straining to see if he could catch a last glimpse of the wolves. Finally, he moved his finger off the trigger and pointed the shotgun toward the sky.

"Let's get out of here," Pa said, grabbing his son's hand.

As they left the forest, a final howl resounded behind them.

## Metamorphosis

### *Day 1*

“Hello Mr. Robertson. You may call me Mrs. Clements, and I would like to die.”

Bram Robertson blinked. Woah. Ok. First patient, here we go. “Um, good to meet you Mrs. Clements.” He extended a hand toward her frail figure that lay prostrate on the queen-sized canopy bed.

“Enunciate,” she said, and gave his strong fingers a light squeeze with her spindly ones. “I won’t be able to understand your mumbling.”

He cleared his throat, set his briefcase down. “Of course, Mrs. Clements.” The legs of his chair protested against the oak floor when he sat.

A bouquet of deep scarlet roses bloomed on her bedside table, which, like everything in the room, looked antique.

“I stopped eating yesterday. Mary – she showed you in? – has been feeding me ice chips. That will be one of your jobs now.” Mrs. Clements pointed to a silver bowl patterned with fern-like designs next to the roses.

He nodded and rested his elbows on his knees. Mrs. Clements’s paper white skin and wispy hair were stark, nearly transparent against the plum purple of her bedspread and drapes.

“What is in your briefcase? What do you do for a living?”

“Oh, um, it’s just my laptop. I came here straight from work. I work for Microsoft. In the IT department.”

“I see. So, I’d be correct in my guess that you do not enjoy the great outdoors much?”

“Not particularly.” Bram smiled, nervous. An interview wasn’t what he had been expecting on his first day. “You know, I’m more of an indoors person.”

“An indoors person.”

Was she correcting his grammar or disapproving of his lifestyle choices? Maybe both? His hands tightened around each other. “Yes, an indoors person.”

“Well, Mr. Robertson, unfortunately you will be getting some more sun in the coming days. Open this drawer.” She patted the bedside table.

He opened the drawer. Inside lay a Moleskine journal and Pilot fountain pen. He took them out, brow creased with curiosity.

“I am a bird watcher. Or, rather, I was a bird watcher. Even if I could make it outside, my hearing is no longer good enough to hear the birds’ calls. Instead, you will record all the birds you hear and see every day and report your findings to me. I will live vicariously through you.” Her hands fluttered in a gesture toward her arched windows. “Tonight, you will start learning the different species of birds that live here in Seattle.”

When in his training did they ever cover bird watching? As far as he remembered, he thought he would only be expected to hold elderly peoples’ hands and comfort them. “Ah, Mrs. Clements, that’s not... You know, a death doula is really only supposed to –”

“Help people in their passage to death?” Mrs. Clements’ brown eyes narrowed. “Mr. Robertson, I have been a bird watcher for the last 30 years. I can assure you, this will help ease my passage into death.”

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Mary stood by the door and waved at him, her hand just a flutter in the dark hallway.

“Well, I guess I’m a bird watcher now.” Bram ran a hand through his light brown hair. “Not something I ever thought I’d be doing.”

“Oh, so she has you taking notes for her too? I’m not surprised. Before I took over the job her previous in-home caretaker warned me that she’d request things like that.”

“You know, I didn’t expect her to be so pushy. This whole death doula thing is turning out to be a little more intensive than I expected.”

“It’s certainly an interesting position.”

“Yeah, although I guess I’m still figuring it out.” Bram shook his head, his lips pursed. “Have a good night, Mary.”

“You too!”

He exited through the heavy front door toward his car. A flicker landed a few feet away, and he took out the Moleskine from his briefcase.

### *Day 3*

“I have something to show you.” Bram opened his laptop while Mrs. Clements looked on, her eyebrows raised in skepticism, just as she had yesterday and the day before. To see the smile that invariably lit up her face each time though was certainly worth going through the same motions again and again.

The familiar twitter of BirdNote’s theme music piped through his speakers, tinny but clear.

“This program plays during my commute every morning. I thought you might like it.”

Mrs. Clements clasped her hands together. “Oh, this is wonderful!”

The announcer continued on about the relatively unknown but rather common Northern Saw-Whet Owl, which seemed to be her favorite program.

As the episode drew to a close, her wrinkles sagged, and her eyes turned inward. “Have you already shown this to me?”

“...Yes. I showed it to you yesterday.”

“Oh. I see.”

He chose another program that she had enjoyed the day before, and they listened in silence.

“I went bird watching in Australia once.”

“Really?” Bram said, and paused the program.

“Yes, in the 80s. But more than the birds, I remember the butterflies.” Mrs. Clements stared toward the window, her eyes glossed over with memory.

“What about the butterflies?”

“Ulysses butterflies. They are black and blue, and as big as your outstretched hand. I was trying to find Night parrots. They are one of the most elusive birds in the world, you see, but I just knew I’d be able to spot one. And there are so many other fantastic birds in Australia as well.”

“Did you see one?”

“Instead, when I was out in the grasslands, I kept seeing these gorgeous butterflies. One landed on my shoulder, just there.” She patted her left shoulder. “And the world stopped. I could have crushed it with my hand, it was so delicate. I have seen so many beautiful birds, but that butterfly was in a realm of its own.”

“You know, I’d like to see one.”

“I am sure you can find photos on that machine of yours.” She cocked an eyebrow at his laptop. “Sometimes I see them here.”

“Here? You mean in your room?”

Mrs. Clements nodded.

“You see Australian butterflies in Seattle.”

“I know I am going crazy, Mr. Robertson. You don’t need to tell me that. Why else do you think I have chosen to die like this? But just because I am crazy does not make the butterflies any less beautiful to me.” Mrs. Clements crossed her arms.

Bram laughed lightly and nodded. “I guess that’s true.”

The old woman’s brown eyes turned to him, narrowed with fire and ringed with pale lashes like soot. Her voice was dangerously low. “How dare you. My thoughts are my own, and you have no right to laugh at them. You have 50 fewer years of experience than I. What do you know about insanity?”

“You don’t need to defend yourself to me, Mrs. Clements. I was agreeing with you. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Mrs. Clements looked toward her window, jaw clenched.

“So, what can you tell me about insanity? As you said I… know very little about it.”

The silence stretched on.

“Would you like me to put the radio show back on?”

Mrs. Clements spoke without looking at him. “Insanity is when your husband is staying late at work for a ‘meeting’ with his secretary and your sons constantly make excuses not to visit because they are too busy and you are stuck dusting this archaic house when you would rather be out listening for Steller’s jays.”

Bram felt like there was a cantaloupe sitting in his gut. “I’m so sorry.” He reached for her, but she snatched her hand away.



“I am hungry. Give me some ice chips.”

Silently, he complied.

Her mouth puckered around the pieces of cold. She almost looked like a child tasting lemon for the first time.

They sat quietly while he fed her chips of ice that wouldn't quench the hunger in her belly but might provide some modicum of relief.

“I haven't seen any Steller's jays yet. Didn't know we even got them around here.”

“You need to keep a sharper eye out, Mr. Robinson. They are around if you know where to look. Such beautiful black and blue birds. That is your assignment for tomorrow. Find a jay for me.”

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Mary saw him out again. “How'd it go today?”

“Ok. Showed her BirdNote again. You know I'm surprised she'd never heard of it before.”

“Oh... she used to listen to it regularly. I guess that's slipped away from her too.” Mary's dark brown bob seemed to droop along with her cheeks. “It's sad to see her like this. She used to be even more of a firecracker, if you can believe it.”

“Oh, I believe it. She must've been quite something when she was younger.” He looked back towards her bedroom and his eyes crinkled. “She still is something. See you, Mary.”

“Have a good night.”

A robin red breast landed in the grass just as he was putting his key in the ignition. His notebook was already out on the driver's seat beside him.

*Day 6*

The door to her bedroom creaked open, and the sound reminded Bram of mourners keening.

Mrs. Clements lay, as thin as an insect's wing, nearly smothered by the brocade blankets on her canopy bed. One crinkled arm lay on the purple sheets, the skin encasing her bones like filo dough. It looked so small beneath the thick posts on her bed carved in swirling leaf-like fronds.

"Hello Mrs. Clements, how're you today?"

There was no reply other than her rattled breathing.

He set his briefcase down next to the chair that, like her, looked antique, and lowered himself onto its dark floral upholstery with a grunt. It echoed in the dusty stillness.

"Why are there so many butterflies?" she murmured.

He slipped his sweaty hand beneath her dry one.

There were no butterflies about the room that he could see. No family photos either. What he had initially taken to be photos of perhaps a daughter he now realized were photos of Mrs. Clements herself in her younger days.

Mrs. Clements beaming at a majestic scarlet macaw on her arm, its rainbow of feathers nearly as bright as her smile.

Mrs. Clements eyes sparkling from underneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, the ocean waves behind her.

Mrs. Clements staring solemnly into the camera, somber in sepia tones.

A flickering bronze gas lamp illuminated the bouquet of wilting roses, their faint scent mixing with the stale aromas of sandalwood perfume and human urine.

“The butterflies...” Her eyelids fluttered half open, and her fingers tightened gently around his.

His heartbeat slowed just a bit at this acknowledgement of his presence. This woman was here, and she was close to death, but she was not alone.

The Victorian aura of the room made him shiver with overly floral yet dark details. Macabre thoughts of post-mortem photography filled his head – grainy black and white photographs of entire families posed together, stiff. He wondered if Mrs. Clements had any photos like these hidden in her Victorian mansion. He wondered if she had any hair jewelry to go with them.

“Their wings. They are so pretty. Do you see them? All black and blue.”

“They’re beautiful,” Bram said.

The dark purple hangings around her ornate bed shrouded her, deepening the shadows beneath her eyes and in the hollows of her neck.

Across from the bed was a sooty fireplace surrounded by a black iron grate. An old log lay charred within. He wondered when it had last been lit. Not on any of the times he had visited. The ornate wood mantel around the fireplace matched the molding along the ceiling with its petite vine-like pattern, and as his eyes travelled along it they widened. He’d always been so busy interacting with Mrs. Clements that he’d never noticed the features of the room: the detailed pink floral wallpaper with a pattern so small it was difficult to make out, or the Turkish rug that partially covered the oak floor which, knowing her, she’d probably purchased herself from a crowded market in Turkey.

This house was a portal to a bygone era. Perhaps Mrs. Clements dated back to those times too.

“Why are there so many butterflies? Tell me why there are so many butterflies.”

Bram squeezed her hand reassuringly. “I’m not sure.”

His eyes wandered to her bulbous, bottom-heavy dresser, topped with a wood rimmed mirror. Bottles of perfume glittered in its reflective surface. The stopper of one did in fact have a butterfly on it, floating above whatever aroma was inside. Bram wondered if it was Mrs. Clements’ favorite perfume.

“They’re...” she said, and let out a long exhale. The rest of the sentence was left hanging like a cocoon suspended from a branch. Sleep’s deep breaths filled the room, a sound that was becoming more familiar day by day.

Before he left he took a closer look at her pictures. There was one that seemed familiar. He picked it up and the metallic dusty smell of the gold frame filled his nose. Mrs. Clements was sipping wine in the dining room of a fancy restaurant with floor to ceiling windows.

He knew that restaurant. He’d taken his wife there the night he proposed.

The corner of the picture frame bit into his palm.

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Mary tugged on a strand of her hair. “She’s been getting sleepier lately. She’s your first patient, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll get through it, don’t worry.” She put a comforting hand on his arm. “I’m willing to bet you’ve been through death before.”

He recoiled slightly and nodded.

When she wished him a good night he didn’t respond.

After he got home he opened his closet which wasn't quite large enough to be a walk-in and trailed his fingers over his wife's dresses.

She had so many.

The swirly blue one she'd worn to her best friend's baby shower. She'd matched all the blue decorations for the new coming baby boy.

The long gold one had made her look like some sort of goddess, too dazzling to behold. She'd bought that one when he'd signed them up for ballroom dancing lessons. He'd danced with her, the cool gold fabric beneath his fingers and the warmth of her skin emanating through it.

And there was the black one.

He removed it from the closet and ran the fabric through his fingers. It was the same black as a midnight sky.

He'd watched her sob in this dress and pull her modest black shawl around herself as they lowered her mother's coffin into the ground. He'd held her tight as her thick tears fell onto the thick fabric.

He undressed and slipped into the unfamiliar garment.

The silky fabric was smooth against his pale skin, but the room around him blurred as his eyes welled with tears.

He couldn't zip the dress up all the way, so he simply held it to his body and cried.

He needed to put a fresh bouquet on her grave.

His head rested back against the once-shared bed, grey eyes rimmed with red.

"You know, you're still beautiful to me, Emma, even though you're only in my mind now. I hope you know that, love."

*Day 7*

Mrs. Clements' hand was warm, if slack, in his hand. With every slight whimper she made he squeezed gently, his fingers a vessel for his comforting thoughts. BirdNote played softly in the background, today's show on the two different jay species found in America.

"Bram, I made some tea if you want some." Mary's voice echoed down the hall. "Pot's on the kitchen counter."

He patted Mrs. Clements' hand. "I'll be right back."

The first teacup his eyes landed on had a pattern of light blue butterflies, and he chuckled inwardly.

He was so busy ensuring his tea stayed within the confines of his cup that he didn't realize it had happened. It was only when he had taken a sip of the bitter drink, set the teacup down on the bedside table beneath the wilted roses, and slipped his hand back into Mrs. Clements' that he noticed.

Her fingers – limp.

The flutter of her breath – gone.

He sat there holding hands with a dead woman. A small seed of guilt that he wasn't crying blossomed in his stomach. She'd had so much life and he hadn't even been there when she had flitted away.

He hadn't done his job. Again. And yet if he hadn't known death before, he knew her now. Knew her maybe better than he wanted to.

Perhaps death eluded him on purpose: first Emma, now Mrs. Clements. Maybe he would only be with the people he truly cared about when he himself ended up on the threshold. Death

was ultimately individual, not communal. He was only here to lead people to the edge, but they had to cross on their own.

## *Day 27*

*July 12*

*Robins: 4 sighted, 13 heard*

*Sparrows: 15 sighted, 20 heard, one nest (young hatchlings, high activity)*

*Chickadees: 3 sighted, 6 heard*

*Crows: 19 sighted, 29 heard*

*Flickers: 0 sighted, 1 heard*

*Steller's jays: 1 sighted!! First time seeing a jay. Beautiful but kind of mean.*

*Were scaring off sparrows from feeder. See sketch below.*

Bram looked up from his messy, disproportionate drawing. He was certainly not an artist, he realized. The tuft on the bird's head stuck up too far and its wings were too large.

He shrugged. He'd get better with more practice.

"You know, I could see this becoming a real hobby." He placed a hand over Emma's name on the headstone, the indentations comforting beneath his fingers. "You would've liked it too."

The petals of the roses he had laid at the base of her grave fluttered gently in the breeze, and the Steller's jay flitted away into the trees.